

Seduced by sexism

How come feminists love a film about a ball-busting woman in love with her own machismo?

The Last Seduction' is a film about balls. References to male genitalia in John Dahl's naughty neo-noir are numerous, but two stand out. Right at the start, anti-heroine Bridget (Linda Fiorentino) contemptuously describes her employees as 'eunuchs'. Upon seeing Bridget, wimpy hick Mike (Peter Berg) declares he's found a way to get 'a new set of balls'. You fool! thinks the audience. And boy, are we right.

The film is entirely seductive, fantastically witty and gripping. Fiorentino, with her ravaged, simian grace, is the '90s equivalent of Simone Simon in 'Cat People' (when she laughs, the camera itself seems to grow dizzy with desire). Bill Pullman as husband Clay has never been better; Berg is a revelation. Altogether, it's a triumph worthy of Mamet - a forerunner of 'The Usual Suspects' in exposing the power of fictions.

What its intelligence disguises, however, is its appalling attitude towards women. Dahl knew what he was doing. 'The whole picture is terribly politically incorrect,' he said at the time. 'Callie Khouri, who did "Thelma and Louise", is a great friend of ours. We were afraid to show it to her for a long time.'

What might Khouri have disliked? For starters, the world of 'The Last Seduction' is totally implausible. There's the husband,

Clay, who steals money just because Bridget tells him to. And then there's the boyfriend, Mike, who just wants to be loved. Even the wily lawyer (JT Walsh) is the sort of man happy to perform oral sex and accept with a shrug Bridget's taunt that his 'lips didn't move fast enough, as I remember'. And let's not forget the detective, who, at the thought of seeing a white woman's ass, lets his mind go completely off the job. All the men in this movie are benign pushovers. If only.

This is also a world made hysterical by women's lib. Not only can Bridget get a top job (better than Mike's anyway) with apparently no effort, she exploits all the gains made by the feminist movement. Such

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gains include an increased awareness of sexual harassment, marital abuse, and rape (as soon as Bridget cries rape the police are on the case). Again: if only. No coincidence, either, that the murder weapon is a can of mace, the feisty college girl's friend. There's a pattern here: when not using feminism against men, Bridget's feeding lines to the racist citizens of Buffalo. Feminism, in

other words, becomes the equivalent of racism. Now how's that for a neat trick?

Here's another. Imagine if this film were about racial rather than sexual politics. Imagine a black character, in a world almost entirely free of racist whites, murdering and framing good-natured liberals. There'd be an outcry, but more to the point, no liberal would enjoy the spectacle. The fact is, women can behave badly as long as they're prepared to have lots of sex (for those not convinced, check out the Wachowski Brothers' 'Bound').

Perhaps, though, this film is an attack on subtle forms of machismo? Certainly, Mike's desire to erase all memory of his shot-gun marriage seems part of a conservative desire to be a 'real' man. But it's hard not to feel that what he's really being punished for is his softness, his innocence about the world. Mike's first mistake is to mistake a man for a woman. His second

(and last) mistake is to mistake a woman for a man, because metaphorically that's what Bridget is. Bridget's exciting because she has none of the despised womanly qualities. Motivated neither by love nor lust (Bridget always has sex for a reason), she's a mean machine who justifies the logic of patriarchy.

The odd thing about 'The Last Seduction' is that most feminists love it. Critic Stella Bruzzi sees it as 'a reversal of '40s film noirs', in that we identify with Bridget. Says Bruzzi: 'It's one of the most challenging examples of modern cinema in this respect.' 'The Last Seduction' is without doubt a more focused film than 'Thelma and Louise'. But at least those heroines get to love and lust. If growing big, icy balls is what it takes for women (and men) to survive, is life really worth watching? *Charlotte O'Sullivan*
'The Last Seduction', Sun, 10pm, CA.

